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Annie: The Musical

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Gilgamesh Taggett and Issie Swickle

It may indeed be a hard knock life, but you sure wouldn't know it upon entering the lavishly restored Kings Theatre on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn for the national tour of "**Annie: The Musical**." The French Renaissance Revival style theater got a \$95 million facelift earlier this year, and to borrow a phrase, "it shines like the top of the Chrysler Building."

The story of little orphan Annie is a well-known and time tested one. A Depression-era redhead tries again and again to escape from her hardscrabble orphanage to find the parents who left her on the doorstep with a note saying they'd return one day, and a half a locket with which to identify her.

The spunky youth charms her way into a holiday vacation with Oliver Warbucks, renowned curmudgeon and billionaire, and after the requisite hijinks and close scrapes with dubious characters, ends up staying with him forever.

The cast at the Kings Theatre met all the benchmarks for the show, and excelled at many of them. Youngster Issie Swickle made for a serviceable Annie, although she lacked the magnetism that predecessors like Andrea McCardle brought to the role. Her orphan cohorts did a good job singing and dancing, with a few extra-exuberant members clearly prepping for a career in the theatre.

Daddy Warbucks (Gilgamesh Taggett) who is reprising the role after two seasons in Cleveland, and his assistant Grace Farrell (Ashley Elder) did a fine job with their roles as Annie's saviors. But they lacked the chemistry needed to make their romantic pairing at the end truly credible.

But the true star of the show was Annie's evil foil, Miss Hannigan, played by the wonderful, rotund Lynn Andrews. In a scene-stealing role immortalized on screen by Carol Burnett, Andrews absolutely shined. This bathtub gin-swilling flophouse floozy grinds her heels into the dreams of these "Little Girls," but in Andrews, we see how Miss Hannigan's own dreams of love and a family were similarly crushed by life.

"I'm an ordinary woman with feelings, I'd like a man to nibble on my ear," she sings. "But I'll admit, no man has bit, so how come I'm the mother of the year?"

Andrews' voice is extremely strong, and almost measures up to her phenomenal physical comedy and stage presence. Every eye-roll and shoulder shimmy got a laugh from the crowd. She chewed up the scenery as though it were a Depression-era pot of rag soup. I'd see this unlikely angel in anything.

In a cast made up of veritable songbirds, Andrews easily held her own. From Annie to the orphans, from

Daddy Warbucks to Drake the butler, all of the cast members had talent to spare. The only thing lacking among the lily-white cast was diversity; if you're looking for that, you'd be better off casting your gaze on the Brooklyn audience, which is heavily Black and Latino.

The children in the audience loved the play, however, and didn't seem to mind. While I would have liked to have seen more variety in a play about the down-and-out hoi polloi living under the Brooklyn Bridge in Hoovervilles, my main concern was over the character of Daddy Warbucks, who lacks a satisfying story arc from curmudgeonly businessman to adoring adoptive father.

Still, "Annie" is a play meant for children, and between the singing, dancing orphans, the rags to riches subplot, and the charming little dog who played Sandy, with a heartwarming limp and all, it met its mark.

The sets and props deserve mention, as they were superiorly done. The first scene opens on the orphanage, and it is picture perfect, from the rickety bunk beds to the falling tiles on the roof. When Annie goes to meet Oliver Warbucks, it is transformed in an instant to a posh mansion interior. In the Hooverville scene, a scrim of the Brooklyn Bridge stood in the background, while front stage was a line of boarded-up businesses, one sporting a poster that read, "Jobless men, keep moving: we can't take care of our own." Harsh stuff!

Costume designer Suzy Benzinger also gets kudos for the cast's pitch-perfect costumes, from the patched-up orphan rags to Lily St. Regis' hoochie dress, to the overcoats donned by Oliver Warbucks' staff. The only misstep is the hideous red afro wig that Annie has to wear during the Christmas scene in her iconic red dress. I mean, Leapin' Lizards! Really?

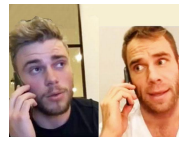
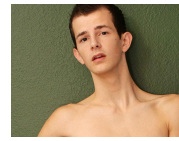
Music director Kelly Ann Lambert gets a lot of credit for the live orchestra and their superb rendition of the score. Hats off to Brian Troiano on trombone for his well-placed slides.

So hey, hobo man, hey Dapper Dan, get your sawbucks together and round up the kiddies to see "Annie" at Kings Theatre. You'll love the palatial setting, and they'll go crazy for the little redheaded scamp that never seems to get old.

"Annie" runs through December 20 at Kings Theatre, 1027 Flatbush Ave., in Brooklyn. For tickets or information, call 800-745-3000 or visit <http://www.ticketmaster.com/venueartist/24717/844866> /?CAMEFROM=CFC_KINGSTHEATRE_EMAIL_ANNNIE_BBW

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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